

The Christian News-Letter

Edited by
J. H. OLDHAM

April 5th, 1944

DEAR MEMBER,

A few weeks ago a young Frenchman, who before the war was a university teacher and who has taken an active part in the underground movement in France, gave a broadcast talk entitled "Where Life is a Lie."¹

When France capitulated it seemed to him, as to many others, that to submit to German domination was to lose everything that made life worth living. The first step was to oppose the policy of collaboration, to reawaken the soul of France, to mould public opinion by the activity of small groups and the clandestine circulation of tracts and newspapers. This was at first not too difficult. But the hand of authority became heavier. The secret police became more active and ubiquitous. A man who had felt the obligation to resist found himself confronted by a fateful decision. If he decided to carry on the fight he embarked on a course in which death shadowed at every moment himself and those to whom he was bound by the closest of ties. Secrecy was everything; the whole of one's life became a lie. There was no escape from the necessity of forging identity papers, of using false ration books, of lying in order to save the lives of others, of killing where necessity arose.

CHRISTIANS AND POLITICS

These are actions, many will say, in which no Christian can engage. If that is so, Christians are debarred from taking part in the movement of active resistance; one cannot engage in it only to imperil the lives of one's associates. It is, however, a fact, as was reported in an earlier Christian News-Letter (C.N.-L. No. 151) that many Christians in France, Roman Catholic and Protestant, have taken a leading part in the movement of national resistance.

A strong case can be made for Christians refusing to commit themselves to courses in which moral compromise is inevitable. Unflinching loyalty to moral absolutes is the salt which preserves society from corruption.

The Norwegian Church is a striking example of the power and efficacy of passive resistance. Without committing itself to active political opposition, the Church in Norway has become the soul of the nation in an unyielding resistance to the invader and oppressor.

But the fact remains that to some men in some situations the call to take up arms against tyranny and injustice may come as an overwhelming moral demand. Are Christians precluded by their Christian

¹ *The Listener*, January 27th, 1944.

obedience from taking part in temporal struggles to achieve justice and right? Is there no will of God for righteousness to be done in the secular order, in the accomplishment of which Christians may rightly take an active share? Or must they leave it to other men to risk their lives and imperil their souls in contending against savage and brutal powers in order that, when order has been established by the labours of others, they may within its shelter practise their Christian virtues?

These are the questions that perplex many thoughtful, honest and sensitive minds among the younger generation. A recent issue of the *Student World*¹ contains reports of discussions of these problems at international gatherings of students and, among other contributions bearing on the subject, a particularly valuable study of the nature of Christian moral action by Dorothy Emmet, lecturer in the Philosophy of Religion in Manchester University.

Political resistance confronts the Christian with the question whether in the political sphere anarchy, or the risk of anarchy, is to be preferred to acquiescence in a tyrannical and unjust rule. This large issue we must leave for the present.

Our immediate concern is the problems of moral compromise which in a peculiarly acute form confront those who participate in underground political movements. Their importance for us is that they set in clear relief conflicts which arise at a multitude of points over the whole range of the activities of modern society. These questions have received far too little attention from Christian thought. Christian moral teaching has got a wrong slant in these matters from the fact that its professional exponents, who are withdrawn by their vocation from the fiercer conflicts and pressures of society, are too easily inclined to regard obligations binding on themselves in their more sheltered lives as equally applicable to those whose circumstances are entirely different.

The conflicts arise from the fact that God has to be served not only in the Church, but in the State. On this subject we may quote from a statement by the French Student Christian Movement,² which especially deserves our attention because of the experiences through which its authors have passed.

"The risen Christ has received all power on earth as well as in heaven. He rules not only over the Church, but equally over the State. . . . One cannot serve Christ in the Church without also serving Him in the State.

"Certainly the area of politics is equivocal, confused and troubled; those who take risks in it always compromise themselves and do not come out with clean hands, but abstention or renunciation is worse than the inevitable compromises in this realm, for we have been given the absolute command of God to act in the relative sphere; and it is the absolute nature of this order which makes out of a relative act a spiritual achievement accomplished in obedience to the faith."

¹ Fourth Quarter, 1943. Obtainable from the Student Christian Movement, Annandale Golders Green, London, N.W. 11. Annual subscription 5s.; single copies 2s.

² Published in the *Student World*, First Quarter, 1944.

THE LIVING GOD

From the discussions of these conflicts two things stand out with striking clearness.

The first is that those who thus encounter life in the raw, without the shelter and support of law and traditional standards, find that the moral conceptions that have served them in the past are no longer adequate, and that they are driven back to something more fundamental. They tell us with emphasis that the answer to the problem can be found not in the moral, but only in the religious, sphere. Moral principles are insufficient, for the reason, among others, that they conflict. It is wrong to lie, but is it right to preserve one's own moral purity at the risk of endangering another's life? To see that the problem is fundamentally a religious problem is to know that there is no answer to it except through faith in God.

What Christianity does, Miss Emmet reminds us, is not to give us a new, distinctive set of moral principles, but to set all our actions in the context of obedience to the purpose of a God who is "the First and the Last." It asks us to respond to the demand of a living God, who meets us in every situation. God is the First, because the call to make the decision comes from Him; He is the Last, since He alone sees the situation as it is, and we commit our action to His judgment and mercy.

The purpose of God to which we have to respond is largely a hidden purpose. We have often to act in what seems like the dark. And yet not wholly in the dark. Something of the character of God's purpose has been shown in the Old Testament, more in the New Testament, and still further light has come through Christian experience reflecting on these. From all this we learn that justice, mercy and truth are included in God's purpose as it is interpreted to us in the Bible. This means that the struggle within which the moral conflicts arise must be one in which we have been led to engage by our concern for these things.

The second thing which the situation we have been considering brings forcibly home to us is that those who obey God's call to accomplish His will for justice in the social order have to discharge that obligation in a particular context. This given context, which it is not within the power of the individual to alter, has its place in God's purpose as well as the call to obedience. Where a great deal of Christian thought goes astray is in seeing God's presence in moral ideals alone. In the Christian view He meets us also in the circumstances of our lives, which are His appointment. The will of God to be done in one set of circumstances may be quite different from the fulfilment of His will that is demanded in other circumstances. A man who, in obedience to God's call, commits himself to a public career may in fulfilling his vocation have to perform actions which in another situation would be wrong, but which in the context in which he has to act can only be avoided by renouncing his original decision and withdrawing from the fight in the public sphere. The moral conflict may reach the point at which he feels it right, in political life, to resign his office, in the underground

struggle presumably to accept martyrdom. But so long as he adheres to his original course, his particular acts, which are dictated by the unyielding necessities of the actual situation, take their meaning from his fundamental and total choice.

This may at first sight look like the vicious doctrine that the end justifies the means, which can lead to every kind of fanaticism and crime. It is, in fact, totally different. But it can easily degenerate into the other as soon as we substitute abstract moral principles and ends for the living, daily response to the renewed demands of a God whose character and purpose do not change, or too lightly identify His purpose with our own limited and darkened understanding of it.

The words in which Miss Emmet sums up the discussion deserve to be carefully pondered :—

“Principles, as such, are not our ultimate authority ; but when we break them we should only do so ‘in fear and trembling,’ acknowledging the value from which they spring. We also must recognize that we break principles at our peril, since they maintain the general respect for these values, and when this social recognition is weakened it cannot easily be recovered. It may only be recovered at all thanks to a sensitivity of conscience and tension of mind in those whose response to justice and truth is carrying them into situations where they have to deceive and lie, or else contract out of the struggle. Those who can act in this spirit (and it is admittedly playing with fire) may not be letting down morality ; they may in fact be discovering its real sanctions behind code and custom, and so making possible a renewal of moral principles.

“These principles may not take just the form they have taken in the past ; but if we are acting in response to our faith in the God of the Bible, I do not believe that we shall come to a ‘transvaluation of values.’ For we are not acting in response to a God Who is ‘beyond good and evil,’ but to a God of righteousness and truth. Our formulation of principles may take different forms in the pattern of new social and historical circumstances, but if we are true to our roots, they will still be expressions of a regard for justice and mercy and truth.”

THE SUPPLEMENT

Probably very few of our readers have first-hand contacts with the mining community. It is essential to understanding that we should see things from the point of view of those who belong to it. We are particularly glad for this reason to publish a supplement written by one who has worked at the coal face all his life, and is a Trade Union secretary in the Staffordshire coalfield.

Yours sincerely,

J. H. Deane

THOSE NAUGHTY MINERS

By HARRY BROWN

"If I had my way, I would string them up!" This remark aboard a London-bound train was made by a young American N.C.O. Lest some of your readers aspire to act as unofficial hangman to British miners, I attempt to show from the inside what has brought about the present unhappy position in the coalfields. I write also as a professing Christian, with a faith all too often dim, but never entirely extinguished, about some of the problems confronting Christians in the mines.

After the last war the miners received a seven-hour day with a promise to consider six hours per day. That mirage was dispelled by the challenge of oil, coal economies, international competition accentuated by the Versailles Treaty, reparations and monetary policy, culminating in the disastrous stoppage of 1926. Such miners as returned to work went back to $7\frac{1}{2}$ or 8 hours per day, the worst retrograde movement in any major industry since the last war. Thousands walked the streets. A Labour Government restored hours to not more than $7\frac{1}{2}$ hours per day. In practice this may mean $9\frac{1}{2}$ hours or more per day on the colliery premises.

The drive to obtain coal at the lowest possible cost brought about a great extension of machinery on the coal faces, creating a still unfinished revolution in mining practice. Long-standing written contract prices for piece work jobs were broken, and new verbal contracts substituted at the owners' dictation, for industrial dictation takes place when men are plentiful and trade unions are weak. Where only the ring of picks, the scrape of shovels and the bang of occasional shots used to be heard, was now the cacophony of the shaker conveyor, the coal cutting machine, the power driller, and at times a barrage of shot-firing, accompanied often by a fog of dust so thick that I have known men to vomit. Whilst the coal cutting machine has cut out the hard work of "holing," or undercutting the coal, work has been speeded up to a pitch of intensity never known before, at many pits under a brutal discipline. Men refusing to stay overtime (an evil of machine mining) were often sent home or suspended. A man unable to get off his "stint" of coal in the shift next day had an overman behind him. Should he remonstrate he was sent home. Men often rose early, used fire and light, paid bus fare only to be told when arriving at the pit or in some cases even descending the pit and walking underground, "No work to-day." Men of independent spirit were (and are) marked for the next comb out. Is there any reason for surprise that men became cynical, embittered, suspicious and filled with a sense of frustration? Can one wonder that appeals in press and on the radio created little warmth in the breasts of hard-working miners?

About 1 in 1,000 persons is killed in the mines yearly, while about 1 in 5 persons suffer injuries which cause the loss of at least 3 days' work per year. Industrial diseases such as silicosis can reduce a man of thirty-five to little more than a living skeleton. To be injured

temporarily means the expenditure of savings to eke out the compensation. Permanent injury means pauperdom. Compensation payments have recently been improved, but still remain inadequate. Moreover, the whole system tends to make an injured man feel a culprit.

We started the war with plenty of coal. Men drifted away to easier and less hazardous jobs, the fall of France hastening the process. Since this war began, I have seen small coal deliberately screened or riddled from the conveyor to be thrown away, never to be recovered. What do your fuel flash economy experts say to that? Too late it dawned on officialdom that coal shortage was coming. If to the hazards and discomforts of mining—such as noise, heat (streaming sweat from every pore all day in some cases), water, dust, low work—one adds monotony, the bane of modern mining, the job at times becomes intolerable.

The Essential Works Order is good in guaranteeing a week's work or wages; but it creates anger by preventing men from seeking work outside the industry, and restricts moving from one pit to another. Much bitterness has been created by forcing pithead men to go underground. The pit head is no more a stepping stone to underground than Eton or Harrow.

Output per man-shift has not risen chiefly because men were able to work harder when working say four or five days per week than on the present full time. Only those working full time on heavy laborious jobs realize the strength and will power required to keep up to fighting pitch. Day or morning shift means getting up at unearthly hours, the night shift a ruinous loss of sleep which renders many a man a bundle of irritation. Nothing has created more anger and humiliation than the fact that wives and daughters of men may come home from the factories with more wages than their husbands after a gruelling week on the coal face.

The Porter award, while excellent as far as it goes, has created chaos in an already complicated wage structure. We have the spectacle of many skilled men receiving the same amount of wages as the raw recruit of twenty-one years of age doing a haulage job.

Next to food, coal is the first essential raw material. Physically and politically the miners are probably more vital than most communities in the country. They are the spearpoint of working-class interests, and because the cost of coal affects the price of nearly every commodity the spotlight of publicity is always on them.

The test of conditions is the number or volume of recruits an industry attracts. Government policy having failed, resort has been made to conscription, hence the Bevin boys, who promise by their behaviour to produce a few more bureaucratic headaches. For too long miners have felt themselves to be the pariahs of society. I have known good men who would by no means reveal their occupation. The average miner is determined with something approaching religious fervour to keep his sons out of the mines, for he sees nothing but a hazardous life of toil under bad conditions, until inability to work, death or accident end his career. Yet there is only the one sure reservoir of labour for the pits, miners' sons.

What is to be done ? The average miner plumps for nationalization (a word which may mean several things), for he thinks it will end exploitation by profit-seekers. I do not propose to discuss nationalization, but here are some views of my own :—

Abolish punitive measures against absentees, for they only create bad blood.

Speedy settlement of grievances. The goodness of many settlements is vitiated by the time taken.

A written guarantee that the part of the Essential Works Order giving a full week's work or wages shall be retained after the war.

A guarantee that when the present shortage of coal is ended, hours per day shall be reduced and a five-day week introduced.

Holidays with pay.

Give the men's side on production committees real power.

At large collieries appoint personnel managers with a sound grounding in the "humanities" and industrial psychology.

Create a rota of miners, giving them a spell on the land in summer.

Vigorous measures to improve safety and conditions underground.

Where is the money to come from ? By rationalizing distribution and by utilizing the treasure house of by-products found in coal.

I now come to the second part of my question, the Christian's lot in the mines. The average miner is fond of beer, football, racing, greyhounds, and loves to gamble on his fancy. Many find gardening a way of escape. Some few find pleasure in the arts of music and drama. A few are to be found as active trade unionists and adult education enthusiasts. Still fewer have any pretensions to any active religious beliefs.

The stranger going into the pits would probably be shocked at the obscene language which prevails. To the initiated it is merely a bad habit easily acquired, hard to knock off, and it is a trial to any Christian to keep his tongue free from such obscenities. I can only suggest setting a good example, it is almost useless to preach. Further, this foul language and lowering of sexual morality can have a bad impression on adolescents. To those who have a "Bevin" boy I can only suggest a sound sex education and a warning against the prevailing obscenity.

The bad feeling created in the pits has almost destroyed the idea of service to the community. Men feel tied to the machine for their living, not working to give warmth, comfort or the power without which industry cannot go. The management, too, feel not servants of the people, but are striving to produce profits. Too often a Christian trying to set a good example in good work is thwarted in his efforts. He must use extreme tact in putting forward his views on service if he is to succeed, for he lives in an atmosphere of suspicion and grumbling, so much has the competitive system eaten into men's lives. Men rarely think of the good features of their lives. Yet in discoursing with men I have found at bottom a wistful hope of an improvement in selflessness, many realizing that until every individual's standard of integrity rises there can be no permanent betterment. I feel that a

Christian should, even at the loss of his own narrow interest, set an example in sacrifice by going the "two miles"; he little knows the cumulative effect of such action. A Christian who hopes to become an official is, at many pits, up against it.

Too often he breaks the law to keep his job, and may have to crush his better instincts in dealing with men. All this involves him in lies which, to the sensitive soul, can be very painful. I speak from experience.

From my experience I know Christians of character to stand out from the ruck. Vitality is admired everywhere in an age when many are devitalized. The great problem of the Church is how to win the souls of the average miner back to higher things, to break down the gulf which separates them from the Church. I would urge that clergy and university men should take up for a time some manual job, mining in a mining area; but always remember that a short period job has different reactions from being faced with a lifetime of it. Remember, too, if the Church is to succeed it must embrace all or nothing! Managements require repentance as well as men.

I do not wish to present too gloomy a picture of mining life. Throughout the mining industry in every coalfield is to be found a grand comradeship underlying all the obscenities, bickerings and suspicions, created, I believe, by the laborious work endured and cemented in a common danger. When accidents occur, sympathy stretches to action to rescue the injured person whatever the dangers. Moreover, a great and vivid humour pervades the pits, obscene, gay or grim. Comrades fall about us, and the lot of a miner's wife is by no means easy in peace or war in her anxiety as to the fate of her man. As I write, news reaches me of one of our men being killed instantaneously by a roof fall. He leaves a wife and six young children. He was a first-class workman.

I have been a miner all my life and many a time cursed the day I went down a pit, and would get out whenever opportunity occurs; but the comradeship of the mine is a bug which gets you, and I know when I leave that my heart will always be with the miners. Finally, I would ask you who sit in the quiet of college or study or church to remember that you do so because of the work of miners and others. Do not hastily condemn, and remember as you kneel that some men kneel all day to provide you with the fire that warms, in order that they may feed their families. Their kneeling may not be worship or adoration, but at least is service which our Lord commended.

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